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Utah State University

Self-Discovery, Self-Sufficiency: Assuming the Role of a Listener While Tutoring

Abstract:

My discovery of the method of student self-discovery in tutor sessions established itself early on in my path of wearing the ‘two different hats’ of tutor and lecturer. By forming a spiel that represents my own personality within established Writing Center philosophy, I attempt to allow the student to control the session and discover improvements of their paper on their own. I do so by taking the role of a listener, which may lend itself as well to my teaching endeavors.

Key Words: listener, ‘two different hats,’ spiel, tutor, lecturer

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Introduction

My time spent ‘wearing two different hats’ as both a tutor at the Utah State University Writing Center and in a lecturing position as a Graduate Instructor in the USU English Program has so far proved challenging. So often while tutoring a student on their writing, I will question whether to simply explain a concept to them, or if I should let them figure it out—in some way—on their own. I see the first option as the role of a lecturer, forming instances like the one above into ‘teaching moments,’ and the latter more the role of a tutor, by taking somewhat of a back seat to provide students a space to learn for themselves. My time so far spent under each hat has led me to distinguish them in this way, and in my tutoring sessions assume the role of a listener.

Developing My Technique

During my first tutor observation, I viewed seven steps of introducing the session crucial to the development of my own methods. This list, from my notes at the time, goes as follows:

1. Introductions
2. First time attending the Writing Center?
3. What is your professor’s name?
4. We have 25 minutes.
5. Are you attending for a class?
6. You will receive an email afterwards.
7. What do you want to do?

The tutor I observed opened in this exact way, and I found it very beneficial as a system to tell the student all they need to know before the session begins. I decided to start out with this step-by-step list in order to bring an element of expectation—for myself—into each session. What the tutor I observed did next, however, I had no way of expecting. Once his student introduced her questions, he fell silent for what seemed like twenty seconds to allow the student to suggest reading the paper out loud herself. I felt very intrigued by this approach as a way to directly

support without entirely insisting upon the student's involvement in the session. I later incorporated this idea into my sessions, though in my own way, for I do not possess the gumption to use silence in such a focused manner. Instead, I simply suggest students read their paper out loud, or show verbal support for them if they immediately suggest it themselves.

Importance of Spiel

At the beginning of each tutoring session, I ask each student if they are new to the Writing Center. If so, I introduce them to the Writing Center's purpose in my own personal spiel:

“Here at the Writing Center, we try to not only help you with your current project, but also attempt to foster a method of self-help for all future writing you complete at the University. Because, while you are in a collegiate setting, the writing you perform, whether to publish or turn in, all becomes a part of the ‘Academic Conversation.’”

I use this more philosophical approach of the Writing Center to get students thinking about their own role within the wider academic scope, and always admit to them that each tutor uses their own individual spiel. By describing how they might ‘foster a method of self-help for all future writing,’ I offer a chance for the student to realize that they can take the skills garnered in our following session forward in their own time. This establishes the tutoring session as more of a self-driven learning experience for the student.

Promoting Self-Discovery by Assuming the Role of a Listener

My first set of tutoring sessions, while bumpy at first, defined my role as a listener early on. In my first session, a walk-in appointment sprung on me without prior knowledge and at a time I had not read the guidebook in full, the student presented a fiction story he had written for his own benefit, and only had questions concerning the validity of the syntax. As I did not have a

grasp yet of how sessions run, I mostly stayed quiet, unable to make suggestions as the student read his work. This experience placed me directly into the role of a listener, obliged only to make terse, largely unspecific comments while the student spoke. And while this student did not seem open to my suggestions, he did catch a few of his own mistakes while reading his material out loud. This allowed me to realize not only the importance of the student reading the material out loud for themselves, but also the benefit of them reading out loud to another person. If students read out loud alone, they might catch a few line mistakes here and there, but having someone in the room while they speak more readily prompts them to correct their writing, I have found. Having someone hear it—especially someone they have come to for help, so a person they most likely see as with experience in writing—gives them inclination to make their sentences better, as a form of positive pressure. Due to this pressure the tutor gives off naturally by listening, the student decides on how to change or improve their writing all by themselves.

By allowing self-discovery through taking a back seat, I attempt to grant the student control of the session so I myself do not assume a place of authority. During my three following sessions, all completed on the shift following my first observation, the students jumped right into my offer of reading out loud or simply suggested it themselves, further convincing me of the usability of the technique. Once these students had established their control in the session by reading out loud and catching a few problem areas, they felt more confident in making further suggestions on how to improve overall. On some occasions these suggestions came even if I offered little feedback. Instead, I found myself only agreeing with their proposed ideas—what I mark as a good session. By giving them the chance to take the session into their own hands at the beginning, I open the door to help them discover wider solutions to the problems of their paper.

Revisiting the Spiel

This process of self-discovery for the students then leads, in theory, to a practice of self-sufficiency. Showing them how to examine their writing along with another person, so they may do so by themselves in future, allows them to ‘foster a method of self-help for all future writing’ as my spiel above dictates. Since I did not base the elements of this spiel on anything other than my own understanding of the Writing Center and of the English Program, I view this approach as a tutoring method fitting to my own personality. Finding I had formed this method of tutoring while repeating my exact spiel each time, and not realizing the connection, showed me how I had also come into the tutoring sessions with my own degree of self-discovery as my method.

Adapting This Method to Teaching

The role of a listener I think also lends itself very efficiently to teaching and lecturing, as it offers the reverse of what a lecture represents by definition. However, the role does not translate so easily through its situation, as a tutoring session is so specified and centralized a space. In a classroom setting, especially one close to thirty students, it would not prove possible for me to hold all peer review sessions over one class period for each. However, I do not need to take the position of the listener myself. I could instead split the students up into groups on peer review days, and have them read out loud to one another, something I have not yet suggested. This experience, especially with a classmate they have not partnered with before, may provide the positive pressure unique to tutor sessions. Granting them an established voice within their groups may also lead them to make more centralized decisions within their papers in discussion.

However, these methods could also lead to poor peer review sessions. Perhaps the student would feel afraid to read their paper out loud, or after discovering one troublesome area of the text the student may decline to read any more. Each of them would need to approach specifically the concept of becoming a listener, I would think, in order to complete the session positively.